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## To Receive With Grace – The Reception of Separated, Asylum-Seeking Minors Arriving in Sweden

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### Abstract

In this article we describe the reception of asylum-seeking separated minors; organisation, rules and routines in daily life. We examine the philosophy behind the reception of separated young people by analysing situations at a group residence. The article is based on aspects of current fieldwork as part of a research project entitled: *Behind closed doors – the significance of interpreting to legal rights and integration with a focus on the reception of separated children and young people*. The philosophy behind the reception of separated minors is based on ethics of rights, i.e. respect for the individual's rights and equal value. These ethics do, however, not deal with questions of the individual in particular. A future issue for research is to develop theory about the parts of the reception process that involve confirming the young person as an individual.

**Keywords:** Asylum-seeking, Minors, Youth

*In Würde aufnehmen – die Aufnahme minderjähriger Asylbewerber in Schweden*

### Zusammenfassung

In dem vorliegenden Beitrag beschreiben wir den Aufnahmeprozess von minderjährigen unbegleiteten Asylbewerbern aus der Sicht der verantwortlichen Institutionen, sowie aus der lebensweltlichen Perspektive der Jugendlichen selbst. Dabei geht es vornehmlich um die Darstellung der grundlegenden Werte, die der Gestaltung des Aufnahmeprozesses zugrundeliegen. Datengrundlage ist eine Fallstudie in einem Wohnheim für Asylbewerber. Der Beitrag ist Teil des Forschungsprojekts: *Hinter geschlossenen Türen – die Bedeutung der Auslegung gesetzlicher Regelungen und der Integration mit Blick auf den Aufnahmeprozess unbegleiteter Kinder und Jugendlicher*. Die Handlungsmaximen, die hinter dem Aufnahmeprozess unbegleiteter Minderjähriger wirken, stützen sich auf zentrale Grundrechte, wie z. B. die Anerkennung spezifischer Individualrechte. Diese „Ethik“ befasst sich jedoch nicht mit Fragen des/der Einzelnen. Eine zentrale Aufgabe für die Forschung sehen wir darin, eine Theorie zu entwickeln, wie im Aufnahmeprozess die Interessen und Bedürfnisse des Individuums stärker berücksichtigt werden können.

**Stichworte:** Asylsuchende, Minderjährige, Jugend

## 1 Introduction

We enter an apartment in an older residential building. It is used as a group residence for separated, asylum-seeking young people. Inside the front door there is a sign stating the group residence's basic values: "Each person shall be treated with warmth and respect". From the hallway we enter a large, homely, combined kitchen and dining room. We are struck immediately by the smell of bread baking in the oven. The room is dominated by a large dining table where the young people and the staff gather to eat and talk. At the far end of the table a boy is sitting alone drinking from a cup. A female member of staff is speaking quietly to him" (Field diary, November 15, 2009).

This young boy is one of a number of separated, asylum-seeking minors who arrive in Sweden each year.<sup>1</sup> According to an enactment that came into effect on July 1, 2006, when a minor arrives he or she is first received by the National Migration Board, which then enters into a care agreement with a municipal authority. The minor is then accommodated in either a group residence or a family home.

In this article we describe how the reception of minors has worked on both the national and local level since July 2006. We deal with the organisation, rules and routines in daily life. We also examine the philosophy behind the reception of separated young people by analysing situations at a group residence. What does the scene above tell us? What are the ambitions and limitations embodied in the reception process?

## 2 Participant observations and extended fieldwork

The article is based on aspects of current fieldwork as part of a research project entitled: *Behind closed doors – the significance of interpreting to legal rights and integration with a focus on the reception of separated children and young people*. The main part of the empirical material used in the article was compiled during participant observations at Liljan, a group residence for separated, asylum-seeking minors. This is a classic way of collecting data within ethnology. It means that we go to the group residence and take part in daily situations and interact with the staff and young people. During and after the observation periods we write a field diary using the thick description method (cf. Geertz 1973). The field diary contains detailed descriptions of people, conversations, the environment, food, clothing etc. Senses such as taste, smell and feelings are included as well as reflections and analysis. Systematic self-reflection (cf. Carpanzano 1977), scrutinising the part we play in collecting data, is a very important element within our research team as the observations proceed.

Since September 2008 we have built up a long-term relationship with Liljan, a group residence situated in a municipality in southern Sweden. For the majority of the young people living at a group residence it is a short-term arrangement. From October 2008 until April 2009 Gustafsson made observations one day and evening each week. She made further observations for three weeks in November and December 2009, spending ten to eleven hours a day in the company of the young people.

Gustafsson was introduced at the group residence by the staff. The aim was to spend time with and talk to the young people. This meant attending classes at school, watching television, playing table football, having an afternoon snack in the kitchen and trying to figure out how the sewing machine works. It also meant spending time with members of

the staff, the guardians of separated minors and schoolmates. It also included several conversations in a special “interpreter room” at the group residence, using an interpreter by telephone. This last part involved non-participatory observation. The time with an interpreter, however, gave *Gustafsson* an opportunity to explain her aims and research more thoroughly and for the young people to ask more complex questions.

Using qualitative methods is delicate. Firstly, doing fieldwork among people to obtain empirical material is always a form of exploitation. This critical point is put to the test when, after the fieldwork period, we apply theories to analyse the empirical material. There are different power relationships and difficulties for research participants to see the long-term consequences of the research they agree to be a part of (cf. *Gustafsson* 2009). Consequently, all research in Sweden involving studies of humans must be approved by an Ethical Review Board in accordance with the *Ethical Review Act* (2003). The researcher must consider and evaluate risks, possible complications and the predictable benefits of the research.

We formulated the risks in the light of experience from earlier fieldwork among refugees, immigrants and minors, and from *Norström's* (2004) experience from work among refugees and separated minors.<sup>2</sup> There is often a therapeutic element in life story interviewing, and in the close relationship that could emerge during participant observations, since the research participant is given an opportunity to talk about his/her own experiences. After the interview, however, there is a risk that the research participant feels exposed, perhaps regretting things she/he has said or done. The researcher must give the research participant an opportunity to discuss those feelings.

Doing research among young asylum seekers is even more delicate. We must bear in mind that they are underage, applying for asylum and thus living in an uncertain situation. They are separated from family and kin, living in a foreign environment, culture and society. They also bring with them experiences from difficult situations, both from their home countries, which are suffering from conflict and war, and from the journey to Europe and Sweden. Our participation means there is yet another adult the young person needs to get to know, and for them to understand the role of the researcher. It has been particularly challenging to explain these things, not only due to a lack of a common language but also due to the research project's quite abstract purpose, i.e. “to analyse the significance of interpreting to legal rights and integration”.

We use participant observations to gain an understanding of how the reception process is organised locally and to gain an insight into how separated minors are received and integrated into group residences, schools, the healthcare system and leisure pursuits. For several reasons, the observations are based on continuity. One reason is the aim to identify everyday practice in the reception process, including discussions involving an interpreter. Another involves ethics. The researcher becomes known to the young people and the staff, a prerequisite for establishing trust. This, however, is a dilemma as the researcher will at some point “abandon” these persons.

In addition to the fieldwork described, we visited a total of seventeen municipalities in Sweden, from Kiruna in the north to Malmö in the south. We conducted short participant observations and interviews with social workers, separated minors, interpreters, staff at residences, guardians, nurses, teachers and staff at the Migration Board. This extended fieldwork includes a number of observations and around 60 in-depth or self-biographical interviews. Since October 2009 we have also worked with a reference group that includes three adults who have experience of coming to Sweden as separated minors.

### 3 Separated minors

Internationally, two terms are used to categorise separated minors: Unaccompanied children and Separated children. Regardless of which term is used it comes down to defining the child's legal status as this has consequences for the opportunities that will be available to the child to plead his/her case during the asylum process and the receiving authority's obligations to the child.

"An unaccompanied child is a person who is under the age of eighteen, unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier, and who is "separated" from both parents and is not being cared for by an adult who by law or custom has a responsibility to do so" (*UNHCR* 1997, p. 5).

*UNHCR* and *Save the Children in Europe* use the term "Separated children" in the joint programme Separated Children in Europe (*SCEP/Save the Children/UNHCR* 2010) as this term reflects better the fact that children, during transit or after arriving in the receiving country, are taken care of by adults who are not parents or their customary primary caregivers:

"Separated children" are children under 18 years of age who are outside their country of origin and separated from either parents or their previous legal/customary primary caregiver. Some children are totally alone while others ... may be living with extended family members (cf. *ibidem* 2010).

We use the term "separated minor", a term that is more appropriate as most of the children we have met during our fieldwork are minors. The majority of young people who arrive alone in Sweden and throughout the rest of Europe (cf. *Ayotte* 2000) are aged 16-18 years.

### 4 Separated minors in Sweden

Since the Second World War, separated minors have been assigned a special category among refugees. According to estimates made by the *Red Cross International Committee* and *UNESCO*, the Second World War produced around 13 million separated minors (cf. *Kholi* 2007), some of them arriving in Sweden.

This means that in Sweden, as in the rest of Europe, there is extensive know-how about how to receive and care for minors separated from their kin and country due to war and conflicts. In spite of this, systematic research into the area of separated minors is limited. In Sweden there are a few examples of studies examining the relationship between separation, reception and integration of the approximately 500 Jewish children who arrived in Sweden during 1938 and 1939 and the 70,000 Finnish children who arrived during the war in Finland during the period 1939-1944 (cf. *Lagnebro* 1994; *Lomfors* 1996; *Räsänen* 1990). Recently there have been two dissertations focusing on separated children (cf. *Hessle* 2009; *Keselman et al* 2008; *Keselman* 2009). The latter examines, among other things, interpreting during asylum inquiries with underage, separated asylum seekers. In Great Britain, there is a group of researchers within the field of social work who have examined work with separated children, using as a starting point the accounts of social workers (cf. *Kholi* 2007; *Kholi/Mitchell* 2007).

The Norwegian sociologist *Jan-Paul Brekke* (2004) carried out research among separated minors at a reception centre in Sweden. He shows that the experiences of these

young people during the time they spend waiting for a decision about whether they will be permitted to stay or not are essential for the rest of their lives. *Brekke* offers insight into what might be important during the waiting period; insight that offers a theoretical basis for how to organise and act on the daily level at a residential facility for separated minors. *Kholi* (2007) shows in his study that such theories are lacking. He found that the staff explained practice in terms of trial and error, intuition and muddling through. We have the same experience. Not many know exactly how to deal with the separated minors. Are they to be treated like any other adolescent? Or like any other young person from a troubled home? Or are their experiences from war and hardship and their flight so special that they cannot be compared at all with other youngsters? What kind of knowledge do they need about being young (in Sweden) and about future possibilities? What kind of knowledge do staff need about young people, about being a refugee, about major personal loss, about themselves and about each child as an individual? There are many questions and few answers.

Systematic research about separated minors is scarce, although on the other hand it is easy to find reports and evaluations. One significant contemporary report about separated minors in Europe was written by *Ayotte* (2000). The report is based on earlier studies and on a large number of new case descriptions of the experiences of 218 separated children. More than half of the children in her study cite war as the primary reason for fleeing, followed by persecution, separation from parents, poverty, trafficking and torture. Other reasons are family breakdown, child abuse, forced marriage and desertion. These reasons correspond to the situation in Sweden.

## 5 Government and municipal responsibility for receiving separated minors

The Swedish reception of separated minors is based on the rights laid down in international agreements, such as the UN Convention on the *Rights of the Child* (1989), the recommendations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in Geneva and the asylum seekers' rights under the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the Geneva Convention. Reception thus has its starting point in ethics of rights, which state that every person is of equal value and is entitled to equal treatment and equal conditions. This is a code of ethics based on respect for *the person* and founded on the ideas embodied in universalism regarding justice, equality and human right (cf. *Benhabib* 1992; *Scheper-Hughes* 1992).

The enactment that came into effect on July 1, 2006 means that under a special agreement and with a clear allocation of responsibility, Sweden's municipal authorities and county councils, together with the National Migration Board and the National Board of Health and Welfare, have joint responsibility for separated young people.<sup>3</sup> Confidentiality is observed between the different authorities. The Migration Board is responsible for examining the minor's asylum application, for matters related to assistance and matters related to returning home (cf. *SFS* 2004). Furthermore, the Migration Board is responsible for signing agreements with municipal authorities governing the reception of separated minors. The responsibility of the County Council includes offering healthcare and dental care to the same extent as for other young people in Sweden.

The change in the reception of separated minors was preceded by serious criticism of the Migration Board in the media and elsewhere, although no research or more systematic evaluations had been made. Consequently, it is not certain *whether* anything has improved following the reorganisation and if so *what*. From our interviews, it emerged that there are different views on what the legislative changes have entailed. The group residence where we made participant observations used to be run by the Migration Board. Some of the staff stayed on after the change in 2006 and they agree that in legal terms the new system is safer for the young people. At this facility, as is the case at several others, the first year under the new system was turbulent. Everything was new albeit on the same premises as before. New and old staff had to learn to work together.

A municipal authority that accepts separated minors is compensated for the cost. On arrival in Sweden, the minor is at first placed in a transit home. The Migration Board should refer the minor to a municipal authority as soon as possible. The municipal authority is then responsible for ensuring that the minor receives the support and help stipulated in the Social Services Act. Among other things, the municipal authority is obligated to investigate the needs of the minor and to decide on a suitable place to live. This could mean one of the group residences run by the municipal authority, or a family home, and sometimes a relative. As the processing of a minor's asylum application should normally take place within three months, the accommodation is meant to be short term, even though we know of young people that have lived there for more than two years.

As long as the young person is an asylum seeker, responsibility for finding any remaining family rests with the Migration Board and thus the social welfare committee in the municipal area in which the young person is resident. The *Swedish Red Cross* also co-operates in finding family and kin – if it is the young person's wish.

Analysing the interviews, we notice that social workers in charge of individual investigations choose different approaches to their responsibilities. One social worker told us that she normally has just one meeting with the new arrival. Her mandate was to refer the young people to group residences. She also stated that she had no intention of "digging" into the person's situation since she had found that they were reluctant to talk to her about themselves. (Field diary February 2, 2010)

Another social worker met each young person repeatedly over a long period, using a family and kin mapping method. She said that some clearly felt safe with adults and trusted them. These young people often came from safe, well-organised homes and environments. Others had no trust at all. However, she experienced that the family and kin mapping gave these young people an opportunity to talk about the past and that this helped to build up trust. (Interview January 13, 2010)

The municipal authority is required to appoint a guardian for the young person, who is responsible for their personal situation up to the age of 18. However, she/he has no duty to support them financially. When a young person is moved from the transit home to a municipal group residence, there will normally be a change of guardian. Sometimes the transfer between the chief guardian authorities and different municipalities fails, resulting in the young person not having a guardian at all. Public counsel is also appointed, charged with the task of representing the young person in the matter of asylum.

If the young person is granted a residence permit, the municipal authority is responsible for the long-term planning of their continued upbringing and to provide them with the prerequisites for integrating into Swedish society. Rules and routines are developed in order to guarantee that the young person's rights will be observed. When put into practice,

these ethics of rights create a moral order; rules and routines say something about how to act and live. A consequence of this is that a fostering role is imposed on the staff at the group residences. Subsequently, the aim of satisfying the young person's rights also leads to moulding that young person.

## 6 Liljan

In the municipality where Liljan is located; the Migration Board ran a group residential facility for separated minors between 1985 and 2006. Following the change in the law in 2006, the municipal social services department opened a group residence for asylum-seeking minors as well as one for minors with a residence permit. Personnel were employed; some had worked for the Migration Board previously whilst others were new. Liljan is situated on the third floor of an apartment block on the outskirts of the city – quite a typical suburban area with apartment blocks, car parks, pre-schools and large green areas for playing and recreation. Up to eight young people live here, both boys and girls. Young people under the age of 12 are generally placed in family homes. Girls and boys live in separate corridors. Each young person has his/her own room while sharing the bathroom with the others. Sometimes siblings share a room.

In terms of furniture and decoration, the group residence is spartan. There are some small ornaments, an odd vase or a candlestick, but generally there are no unnecessary items. The kitchen, dining room and living room are the common areas at the facility. In the living room there are sofas, a TV, a number of games and table football.

When registering a minor, a list is made of his/her belongings; towels, underwear, jeans etc. The following is an extract from the field diary about a newly arrived boy's room and his possessions:

“Everything he owns is on the bed or on the small desk. The room has grey plastic flooring with a small pink “Oriental” carpet. The walls are covered in textile wallpaper painted pale green. There are a couple of thin curtains and a small notice board made of cork. There is a bed with striped sheets in black, white and red, and a small desk with a reading lamp. There is also a white wardrobe with hangers and a box for clothes at the bottom. Hanging on a hook on the outside of the wardrobe is a pair of jeans and a warm black winter jacket with brown lining. The boy shows us that he also has another winter jacket, also black. He has two pairs of socks, two pairs of underpants, a pair of shorts, a pair of tracksuit bottoms and a number of T-shirts. He also has three towels, one black, one white and one red. There is a soap bag on the desk. I could see it contained toothpaste. There was also a large tube of hair gel on the table as well as a digital alarm clock, still in its box, a file with a number of exercises involving simple words and phrases and a couple of writing pads. It looks as if the boy has been studying a little. The member of staff lifts up the file with the exercises and together with the boy they read a number of phrases: “Hello, Goodbye, Thank you. My name is NN. How are you?” (Field diary December 11, 2008)

Liljan is staffed day and night, with at least two people on duty at all times. It is locked; the young people do not have their own keys and instead ring the doorbell. Breakfast, lunch, snacks and dinner are prepared and served at set times and everyone is expected to be there, unless they are prevented from doing so by school or leisure activities. On the cupboard door, which is locked, there is a note: “Sweet almonds only at weekends and cereal only for breakfast” while the young people have unlimited access to the fruit in the kitchen and the drinks in the fridge.



After breakfast the young people go to school; introductory courses for immigrants for those who are of high-school age or a secondary school preparatory class for the younger ones.<sup>4</sup> They start coming back from school from around 2.30 pm. Afternoons and evenings are mainly spent socialising with friends outside the unit, at the library, at the swimming pool or at a youth club. They must be home by 10 pm at the latest on weekdays and be in bed by 11 pm; midnight at weekends. Several of the boys go to football training or the gym. On Saturdays and public holidays, the staff, in consultation with the young people, arrange excursions and activities, ranging from barbecues and fishing to visits to the "Laser dome". Once a term, they all take the Liljan minibus and go to an outlet centre where they buy clothes and so on.

When a young person first arrives, he or she is registered. Each young person is assigned two contact persons from the staff. It is their duty to introduce them to the group residence and to go through the rules and practicalities with them. This is done as part of three introductory meetings that generally take place in a separate room with the aid of an interpreter by telephone. At best, the matter of a guardian has been resolved before the third meeting. Thereafter, most of the practical matters are dealt with by the guardian, particularly finances and matters related to the asylum examination. Ideally, a guardian should visit the young person at least once a week, although in practice this is sometimes difficult. The contact persons are required to have weekly discussions, where they check that everything is in order. There is close co-operation with a social worker, who is responsible for dealing with the young person's placement and need for assistance.

As soon as possible after being received by the municipal authority, the young person undergoes a medical examination at the refugee health care department. Before the examination takes place, a faeces test is done. Prior to being confirmed that the young person is healthy, she/he is not allowed to help to prepare food. During the second discussion, the young person, in consultation with the contact persons, begins to fill out an "individual development plan". This plan includes a number of general points about accommodation, schooling, health and identity. Based on this plan, the young person, with the help of the contact persons, formulates a number of goals. The goals are often very concrete, e.g. that the young person cleans her/his room once a week, asks the staff for help with homework, goes to training once a week.

Staff on duty must keep a daily record for each resident. A note is made in case there is anything special; if a certain wish is expressed by the resident, if someone has tried to get in touch with them, or their mental state. Food and preparing the food are also subject to routines. They must all be able to eat all the food that is prepared and food such as pork is avoided. The residents are allowed to be involved in preparing the food.

There are routines for cleaning and laundry, where everyone is involved. There are rules for the use of the computer, access to a swimming pool card, travel to friends and acquaintances during the holidays and at weekends, visits by friends and for hygiene. Routines are designed so that nothing should be forgotten; the young person's rights and the various elements in her/his existence – accommodation, health, school, leisure, and personal development – must be covered. The rules are there to foster the young people; they must be punctual and be able to look after themselves regardless of whether they are allowed to remain in Sweden or if they are required to return to their home country or another country.

Interpreters are used mainly for information purposes, such as during the registration procedure at the group residence, when going through the development plan or for asking

questions. Other conversations take place using the little Swedish they know and with the use of body language.

Although life at group residences is mostly calm, staff at several of the group residences we visited describe conflicts, arguments, all-out fights and threats – between the residents, between staff and the residents and between members of staff. At first it was difficult for us to imagine what all this was about. However, the participant observations at Liljan made it more explainable. Below is an account of a case we have chosen carefully and which describes the difficulties related to everyday situations. What can be dealt with and what is put out of sight?

## 7 Hassan gets into trouble

A sports hall is available to Liljan one evening a week. Anyone who wants to can go there accompanied by the staff, to play sports, mostly football. The hall is rented together with Björken, a group residence for young people with a residence permit.

“It is already seven o’clock and the sports hall has been booked between 7.30 and 8.30 pm. Adam and Amanda are on duty. Adam clears the tables and does the washing up. Amanda and I gather the boys who want to go along and play football and we drive them down to the sports hall. All eight boys want to go. When we arrive it is already dark. The boys quickly disappear into the sports hall.

The boys from Björken have already started a football match. A little reluctantly they reorganise themselves. The sports hall is small and the boys can only play three against three. Altogether there are 15 boys aged 14-18 in the hall and they take up a great deal of space even while waiting. There is a lot of squabbling as the boys from Björken don’t want the younger boys from Liljan to play at all.

Suddenly everything explodes! A violent argument has broken out and when we turn around it first looks as if everyone was fighting everyone. In the centre there is a boy from Liljan, Hassan. His T-shirt has been ripped to shreds. Two boys from Björken are fighting with him and the others appear to switch between supporting their “friends” and pulling them apart. However, it seems that everyone is afraid of Hassan. The younger boys from Liljan are crying. With the boys’ help, we succeed in breaking up the fight and the now bloody combatants retreat. Benny, a member of staff from Björken, examines his boys. Hassan has gone. After a while he turns up. The two adversaries from Björken immediately rush at him again and shout something. Hassan moves towards them, showing them his weapon, a 15 cm long triangular piece of glass. He waves it at them and they run away.

Everything happens very quickly. Amanda has not seen the piece of glass but when the trouble starts again she calls the police as the boys have threatened to continue the fight outside the building. Shortly afterwards, Hassan gets rid of the piece of glass. The police arrive within minutes. When the two police officers enter, Hassan is standing in the doorway, his back against the wall. Several of the boys point him out as the one who started it. He says: “I want an interpreter.” One of the police officers says something and Hassan pushes her by placing the palms of his hands against her chest. A little while later, four police officers arrive and together they try to find out who did what.

A search is made for the piece of glass. The younger boys are still very upset and are crying their eyes out. Finally we all go home. Hassan is taken away in a police car.

Back at the group residence, Amanda asks the boys if they would like to talk about what happened, but they don’t. The police call and ask for someone to be present during the interview with Hassan as he does not have a guardian. As I leave to go home, I can see Amanda sitting with Hassan in the police car. He is being interviewed with the aid of an interpreter on the telephone” (Field diary, January 28, 2009).

Hassan stated that he had been bullied by the boys at Björken for some time because of his ethnic origin. What happened that evening was the last drop and he was very sorry that he had become so angry. He had lived at Liljan for 1½ months before the incident and he had tried to cut himself on one occasion. Two weeks after his arrival he absconded. The contact person managed to call him, discovering that he was in another town and that he was clearly either very drunk or high on drugs. On his return to Liljan he had been taken off the register at the Migration Board, thus losing his guardian. Consequently, there was no guardian who could support him on the evening of the trouble. A week after the fight his wish to be moved from Liljan was granted. He was placed in another, larger town. He absconded the very first evening and since then he has lived in secure accommodation.

The events in the sports hall could be considered extraordinary – which to a certain extent they are – but similar events are quite common at group residences where young boys and girls with different backgrounds live close to each other in the stressful situation of waiting for asylum. Even decisions regarding residence permits give rise to strong feelings that need to be vented.

It was only after the fight and the police report that Hassan had the opportunity to talk, via an interpreter, in peace and quiet to a social worker and the contact staff. Before that, despite the fact that he had both absconded and cut himself, he had not been offered any therapy or even a simple chat with someone who could find out how things were. He was only given the opportunity to express his feelings and his experiences through an interpreter when the police needed to interview him. In the last part we will discuss the ambitions and limitations in the reception process. In what ways can Sweden *receive* these boys and girls?

## 8 Receiving with grace

Taken as a whole, the reception of separated asylum-seeking minors in Sweden is ambitious, well organised and well funded. And yet there are problems. Of Sweden's 290 municipalities only 105 had an agreement with the Migration Board in November 2009, although more than 60 had received minors without an agreement. There are apparent difficulties in coordinating and interpreting different laws and responsibilities and, as mentioned above, the co-operation with chief guardians when a minor moves from the receiving municipality to the municipality of residence.

The overall ambition on all levels is to grant the minor her/his rights to a fair asylum procedure, a home, schooling, health care and leisure activities according to standards in Sweden. Yet, in every group residence we have visited and in all the interviews we encountered problems like Hassan's.

In the days after the fight involving Hassan, *Gustafsson* took part in and observed more than four hours of interpreted conversation between Hassan and his staff contact persons. Hassan had asked to be moved from the residence and at first the conversations were about how to arrange this as well as going through the report from the police interview with Hassan. During this process *Gustafsson* noticed a change in Hassan. He was able to establish a relationship with his female contact person. At the end of the sessions he had changed his mind and wanted to stay at the group residence. The staff, however,

felt that they could not handle Hassan and he had to move. On the day of departure he was crying and he gave his contact person a huge hug. In later conversations with *Gustafsson*, the staff told her that they have mixed feelings about what happened, thinking that perhaps Hassan just needed to talk to someone who was prepared to give him time and to listen to him.

Of course social workers, guardians, teachers and others involved with the separated young people listen and ask questions. But what we have observed is that the young people are heard in matters and contexts that *the recipient wishes to hear about*. In daily life the majority does not have a common language and consequently using an interpreter is important. As we have seen, these are used primarily to meet the minor in an "abstract" sense, i.e. to cover the rights of the minor with regard to accommodation, schooling, health and leisure. It comes down to providing information or asking questions about things related to here and now. Few discussions deal with existential questions, the identity of the individual, the nature of his or her experiences or even discussions about day-to-day things such as fishing, love, television programmes or football. Consequently, there is a reduction of the young person as an individual, concrete person.

Young people, like Hassan and other boys, are obviously stressed by their uncertain situation. Only 62 per cent are granted permission to stay in Sweden and they fear expulsion. To what extent is there time, trust and scope for the individual to express his/her reality, e.g. experiences prior to arriving in Sweden, needs regarding family, and problems related to the waiting situation. The level of competence varies when it comes to dealing with stress associated with the situations of the individual, e.g. dealing with anger, nightmares, insomnia and bedwetting. Lack of competence in this area leads to an inability to care for the child, as in the case of Hassan.

As we could see in the introductory quotation from the observation made at the group residence, there is a stated goal of meeting the individual with warmth and respect. Warmth and respect in practice often seems to take the form of looking after the young person through activities such as baking bread, making tea, playing table football and helping with homework. It is comparatively easy to describe the achievements related to the organisation of the reception of separated minors as there is a language for these rights and also a tradition of such evaluations. On the other hand, we have found a lack of a more systematic vocabulary, theory or method to deal with questions of the past, their family and seeing and listening to the young people. There is thus a need for more developed theory regarding those aspects of the reception process that deal with identity, history and an understanding of the young person as unique and in need of being confirmed as an individual.

The conclusion is that the philosophy behind the reception process is based on respect for the individual's rights and equal value. We can call this comprehensive philosophy ethics of rights. However, these ethics do not deal with questions of the individual in particular. We would call a philosophy dealing with the individual as ethics of grace. Such a concept helps us to understand how existing ways of receiving separated minors relate to the needs of the individual. A future issue for research is to develop theory about the parts of the reception process that involve confirming the young person as an individual.

## Notes

- 1 In 1992, almost 1,500 separated children arrived from the war in former Yugoslavia and in 1993-2005, 350-450/year from different parts of the world. Since 2006, the number increased each year up to 2009 when 2,400 children arrived. The average processing time during 2009 was 114 days. The majority of those granted a residence permit are not recognised as refugees but were permitted to stay on the basis of particularly distressing circumstances (cf. *Aliens' Act* 2005, Section 5, sub-section 6).
- 2 Five years as a teacher in preparatory classes for refugee children. Ten years as the head of an immigrant service bureau, dealing with the reception of separated minors from the Middle East and Vietnam. Extensive fieldwork in refugee camps/centres and other refugee work in Sweden, Turkey, and several countries in Europe and Africa. PhD thesis *I väntan på Asyl* (Waiting for asylum) 2004.
- 3 In 2002, the Government assigned the National Migration Board and the National Board of Health and Welfare, in consultation with the Swedish Integration Board, the Children's Ombudsman and the Swedish Association of Authorities and Regions as well as other organisations concerned, the task of improving the reception of separated, asylum-seeking children and young people.
- 4 The introductory course includes Swedish, English and mathematics, corresponding to the level a student ought to have attained when he or she begins high school. The programme also includes a general studies aspect with a focus on Swedish culture and community life.

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